While some hydro developments such as the Soda project on the Bear River have a regionally limited public draw—most people couldn't find it on a map—others have national significance. Places like Shoshone Falls, "The Niagara of the West," and Hells Canyon Dam, with the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and a Wild and Scenic river just downstream, receive visitors from all over the world, and they have their own exit signs on the interstate. Regardless of how large or small the public attention these places get, all have recreation facility improvements that benefit those using the flat-water above the projects, the rivers below, or the associated project lands. Those facilities vary considerably depending on both the level of use, and the management of the adjacent area. Typical recreation improvements include boat ramps, restrooms, parking areas, picnic tables, boat docks, covered picnic shelters, campgrounds, and day use areas.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) has oversight over all privately owned hyrdo projects in the US. When dams are first constructed they receive 30- to 50-year licenses from FERC. Near the end of the license period, the utility begins preparing for a new license. That process is called relicensing. At the beginning of the relicensing process, recreational use inventories of all existing facilities in the area are conducted, as well as user preference surveys. A huge effort is made to understand regional demands for recreation facilities, and to project what future recreational demands will be. Most utilities ultimately end up with an adaptive management approach to address future demands and trends.

Aesthetic considerations are important at hydroelectric projects when dealing with all manmade improvements including recreational facilities, project-related transmission lines and towers, and associated warehouses, offices, housing and other buildings. All have an impact on the view corridor and ultimately on the recreational experience. Many things can be done to minimize visual impacts using the landscape techniques of form, line and texture, as well as choices involving color and materials. Most transmission lines newly placed or recently replaced are made of Korten steel, which is designed to achieve a rusted patina, which blends into the landscape as it oxidizes. Reflective surfaces are avoided, and paint colors are chosen to blend in with the environment. Building are placed so as to not break the skyline. Most aesthetic mitigation involves making conscious decisions to fit improvements into the landscape at the time of construction, or changing a paint color or a roof material through the relicensing process.

Developing Information and Education signs and integrating a style for all directional and informational signs are other aspects of relicensing. Many places have too many signs and often these signs are negative in addition to being unsightly. While signs are unavoidable, there are ways to minimize the impacts, such as collecting information at kiosks, and developing a style for information and educational information signs that people can recognize.

Noxious weeds are an integral part of the recreation portion of new licenses at hydro projects. Recreation activities both spread noxious weeds and are negatively impacted by them. Driving the Kleinschmidt Grade out of Hells Canyon, the road is blanketed by goat heads. Car tires pick them up, as do all tires from bicycles to ATVs. They get transported on the soles of shoes and on anything that has been set on them. Stopping to patch tires punctured by goat heads can really crimp a recreational experience.

Noxious weeds can impact a visual corridor, though not everyone might recognize their presence as a negative impact. Some people see dainty purple flowers, others see knapweed which replaces forage and displaces large game. Or maybe it's a monoculture of purple loosestrife along a waterway, providing no habitat for birds and in effect creating a sterile environment void of birds and small mammals.

Along watercourses, Eurasian watermilfoil is becoming the focus of recreationists and botanists. Milfoil can grow thick mats in shallow bays making access to boat docks and ramps almost impossible. It is easily spread from one water body to another by hitchhiking on boat props and trailers.

A huge effort is made to understand regional demands for recreation facilities

Once established, removal is impossible, and treatments are expensive and short lived. Small sections of the plant can survive on a trailer for days after leaving a water body and still survive and flourish when re-wetted.

Relicensing a dam often involves more than one state, National Forest and/or BLM lands, several Indian tribes, and all the associated state and federal regulatory agencies. Some relicensings have taken less than four years, and others have taken closer to 20 years.

Though the process is often long and occasionally tedious, carefully considering all the potential impacts a hydro project may have is important to the enjoyment of countless future recreationists.

Mary Lucachick is the Statewide FERC coordinator representing Idahoan's interests on recreation and aesthetic issues related to licensing hydroelectric projects. She works for the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation. Mary is involved in all the relicensing processes in Idaho, and resulting new license implementation on the mid Snake River, the Bear River, and the Clark Fork River. She consultants with the main power providers for the state: Idaho Power, Avista, and PacifiCorp, along with individuals proposing new hydro sites.